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## **‘Alas, alas. House, oh house!’: The collapse of the Cologne City Archive**

**Dora Osborne**, The University of Edinburgh

### **Abstract**

When the Historical Archive of the City of Cologne (known as Cologne’s City Archive) collapsed in 2009, a municipal institution became visible in quite unintended ways. The incident and its consequences tell us about the structure, constitution and regulation of the archive as such but also about the significance of the archive for the memory culture that shapes Germany today. This article turns to the collapse to show how the archive is implicated in the politics of the city and of memory. In the midst of other local scandals, the disaster has become an emblem of political and moral breakdown in Cologne, but it has also confronted citizens with the loss of something fundamental – given, but perhaps not acknowledged – to their identity. This article outlines the response to the incident more broadly, before focusing on works by the British Jewish artist Tanya Ury (*Fury*, 2009, *archive burn out*, 2014) and the Austrian writer Elfriede Jelinek (*Ein Sturz/A Fall*, 2010), which use the former archive as a site of resistance, challenging the prescriptive, patriarchal logic of the archive and its implications for the culture and politics of memory.

### **Keywords**

archive

Cologne

Jelinek

Ury

memory

performance

[L]'idée de tout accumuler, l'idée de constituer une sorte d'archive générale, [...] l'idée de constituer un lieu de tous les temps qui soit lui-même hors des temps dans un lieu qui ne bougeait pas, eh bien, tout cela appartient à notre modernité.

[T]he idea of accumulating everything, of establishing a kind of general archive, [...] the project of organizing in this way a sort of perpetual and indefinite accumulation of time in an immobile place, this whole idea belongs to our modernity. (Foucault 1994: 759, 1986: 26)

Ich habe von diesem Einsturz einen regelmäßig wiederkehrenden Traum.

[I have a recurring dream of that collapse.]

(Sebald 2002a: 165, 2002b: 112–13)

On 3 March 2009, in the space of just 8 minutes, the Historical Archive of the City of Cologne collapsed.<sup>1</sup> Whilst by some miracle the archive building on Severin Straße was evacuated in time, an adjoining apartment block also gave way, claiming the lives of two young men, Kevin K. and Khalil G., and leaving other residents homeless. Nevertheless, the human cost of the disaster was considerably lower than it might have been, for a week earlier a large number of revellers had passed along Severin Straße, a street on the route of the ‘Rosenmontag’ procession that marks the highpoint of Cologne’s annual carnival celebrations. The material losses were, by contrast, huge. Of the archive’s collection, 90 per cent – 30 kilometres of documents – plummeted into the mud below, making this Germany’s most significant loss of cultural assets since World War II (Schmidt-Czaia and Soénus 2010: 7).

With documents dating back to the first century, Cologne’s Historical Archive was considered the most significant north of the Alps. Already in the fifteenth century, part of the town hall was used to store important records, and as Germany’s largest medieval town and centre of European trade, Cologne’s archive of civic documents steadily grew. In the nineteenth century, Cologne appointed its first official archivist and a purpose-built archive was established in the city centre. Whilst the archive building was damaged during World War II, the holdings were moved to safety in good time and so escaped the devastation wreaked on the city itself. The documents were returned soon afterwards, but as the archive grew and space became increasingly short, plans were made for a new building. In 1971, the archive moved to its state-of-the-art premises to

the south of the city centre. This building on Severin Straße led the way in archive architecture and became known internationally as the ‘Cologne model’ (Schmidt-Czaia 2010: 20). In addition to its significant medieval collection, the archive housed a wealth of very recent material, such as documents from Konrad Adenauer’s time in office as Mayor of Cologne and unofficial records of the various protest movements that have been active in the city since the 1950s. The archive also boasted more than 800 personal estates, and just weeks before the collapse, had taken receipt of that of post-war author Heinrich Böll. The collapse is unprecedented in the history of modern archives (Schmidt-Czaia 2010: 23) and presents a significant challenge to those dealing with its consequences. In the immediate aftermath, 95 per cent of the material was retrieved in a massive salvage operation and rescued items were distributed to over twenty so-called ‘asylum archives’ across Germany (Stadt Köln. Der Oberbürgermeister 2012: 31). This timely intervention minimized the damage caused by mud, water and rain, and put material back into specialist care, but a long process of restoration awaits and it may take upwards of 30 years before the resources can be used again.

The collapse of the archive marks ‘the end of a long archival tradition of safe custody’ (Schmidt-Czaia 2010: 23).<sup>2</sup> Not only did the disaster severely compromise the archive’s holdings but also its institutional authority. As Achille Mbembe notes, ‘[t]he archive has neither power nor status without an architectural dimension’ (2002: 19). In *Archive Fever* (1996), Jacques Derrida explains that the word archive has its origins in a civic, juridical context, that is, in the house of the law. The archive was ‘initially a house, a domicile, an address, the residence of the superior magistrates, the archons, those who commanded’ (1996: 2). The superior status of the magistrates gave them guardianship of

important documents and also the power to read and interpret them. In this position, ‘they recall the law and call on or impose the law’ (1996: 2). Thus the law governing the archive is at once made and upheld there. In other words, the archive functions only by enforcing its own internal, institutional law: ‘it keeps, it puts in reserve, it saves, but in an unnatural fashion, that is to say in making the law (*nomos*) [...]. It has the force of law, of a law which is the law of the house (*oikos*), of the house as place, domicile, family, lineage, or institution’ (1996: 7). Where documents come together in the house of the law, this is a place of both ‘consignation’ and ‘domiciliation’:

It is thus, in this *domiciliation*, this house arrest, that archives take place. [...] At the intersection of the topological and the nomological, of the place and the law, of the substrate and the authority, a scene of domiciliation becomes at once visible and invisible. (1996: 2–3, original emphasis)

With its collapse, the structuring principles (the topological and the nomological) of the Cologne archive were exposed in the very moment of their invalidation.

The physical collapse of the City Archive signals the breakdown of the law that constitutes its internal order and it exposes the deeply political nature of that institution. As director Bettina Schmidt-Czaia notes, the archive has a complex network of stakeholders, whose different needs must be taken into consideration (2010: 27–29). For Derrida, the regulation of the archive is necessarily political, and as *res publica*, the archive has implications for collective memory: ‘There is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory’. These power relations can be seen in ‘the

participation in and the access to the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation' (1996: 4). Before the disaster and despite its status as a civic institution, the archive was best known to specialists who used its holdings. Ordinary members of the public were more likely to walk past without reflecting on its role or significance, perhaps without even noticing it. But the collapse has made the archive visible in quite unintended ways and it has become the object of unprecedented public attention. The extent of the archive's holdings became apparent in the very moment that this material became unavailable, and the incident has since exposed massive problems at the level of local government, frustration amongst Cologne citizens and a deeply ambivalent relationship towards memory and history in the city. Indeed, this disaster has implications that reach far beyond the significant material losses sustained. The collapse is first and foremost a local political affair: it has provoked strong feeling in and about Cologne, an emphatically German city, but one that, with its strong regional identity, defines itself in opposition to Berlin and Munich. More broadly, however, the (temporary) loss of the archive says something about the politics of memory that in many ways define contemporary Germany. Thus, the significance of the Cologne incident challenges the 'Berlin-centrism' of recent scholarly discourse, shifting attention to another city, one that also has stakes in Germany's memory culture.<sup>3</sup> This article considers how the collapse of the City Archive has become symbolic for a crisis in local politics but also reveals tension in collective identity predicated on a dual imperative to remember and forget. It turns to work by the British Jewish artist Tanya Ury and the Austrian playwright Elfriede Jelinek produced in response to the disaster and shows how their respective performances

not only lend expression to the losses incurred in this specific incident but also to the troubled status of the archive in the politics and culture of memory more generally.

### **Cologne and its discontents**

The suspected cause of the collapse was excavation and construction work undertaken to extend the city's north-south underground line. It seems likely that ground water broke through a retaining wall, producing a vacuum that pulled earth – and then the foundations of the archive – into the excavated tunnel (Otten 2010: 68–70; Fischer 2010: 40–41).

Already in 2004, the spire of a nearby church had begun to lean visibly, and in the months leading up to the disaster, staff had reported cracks in the wall of the archive, but these warning signs went unheeded. It is a cruel irony that apparent negligence led to the loss of an archive that, through careful planning, survived the devastation of the last war (Schmidt-Czaia 2010: 19–20). It is perhaps an even greater irony that valuable town planning documents kept in the archives were being used to assist engineers in their work on the underground line (Anon. 2007: 52–54). The questions asked of and about the archive in the aftermath of the collapse have yet to be answered. Five years later, the incident remains a scandal for which no one has yet been made legally responsible, and all that remains at the site is a gaping hole, known locally as the 'Loch'. In 2012 work began on the construction of a viewing platform from which legal investigations can be carried out, and at the time of writing, divers from the Netherlands are due to establish whether or not there is a hole in the retaining wall. Surrounded by metal grilles and plastic barriers, the former archive suggests a construction site, one of many in the city,



but in fact it has become emblematic for more wide-reaching political, financial and moral breakdown (see Figure 1).

<<insert Fig.1 here>>

In the years following the collapse, diverging narratives have emerged. The official account is future-oriented, focusing on the expertise and technical sophistication of the restoration work and the plans for the new archive (see the information brochure issued by Cologne's mayoral office, *Bergen, Ordnen, Restaurieren*). For Schmidt-Czaia, the incident has precipitated necessary change, such as adapting to the challenges of digitization. Her vision for the new archive as 'citizens' archive' puts the people at its centre and emphasizes dialogue and transparency (2010: 31–36). This contrasts with the frustration expressed by family members and executors, however, who claim that the emergency evacuation was unsystematic and that subsequent operations have been shrouded in secrecy. Those seeking information have been met with silence (see König 2011: 8) and can establish neither the condition nor whereabouts of specific material. There is also much wrangling over the new archive, plans for which have already been scaled down to reduce costs, and as decisions are deferred, the financial implications of interim archiving become increasingly insupportable (Kleikamp 2013). Unsurprisingly, the archive collapse and its poor handling have generated significant discontent amongst the people of Cologne, especially in the context of numerous recent local scandals, claims of negligence and corruption. Köln kann auch anders: Schluss mit lustig!/Cologne Can Be Different: The Joke's over!, is a local, independent group that protests against Cologne's negative image and campaigns for change. The archive is a key issue for the

group and members organize various regular events including annual commemorations. Another independent local group of committed citizens, and artists and architects engages specifically with the collapse of the archive and its consequences: ArchivKomplex makes use of the word ‘complex’ to refer not just to the network of institutions, groups and individuals connected to the archive but also the complicated development of events over the last five years. On the third anniversary of the incident, it exhibited *24 Sätze zu 8 Minuten/24 Sentences about 8 Minutes* by photographer Reinhard Matz.<sup>4</sup> Two dozen commemorative placards, each with a single sentence, were attached to the metal barriers surrounding the site to form a kind of narrative about the archive and its collapse (see Figure 2)

<<insert Fig. 2 here>>.

Local residents commented on the positive effect of the installation. After seeing one random sign, passers-by then went back to walk along the whole stretch, looking at each sentence like Stations of the Cross (Anon. 2012a). But Matz’s signs were removed soon after they had been put up by the construction company in charge of the site, who, presumably plagued by the persistent legal ambiguity surrounding the incident, claimed that the assembled crowds posed a safety hazard (Annon. 2012b). The signs were reinstalled soon after, but the initial response indicates intolerance of, and unease at, such publically driven initiatives to remember the collapse.

The response to the collapse reveals tension in Cologne between its citizens and those who govern how its past is preserved and inscribed. The loss of the archive, which, for many, was simply there, exposes how this institution was fundamental to, and

constitutive of, memory and identity in the city. As Aleida Assmann has shown, the archive mediates between generations and so is fundamental to the construction and transmission of cultural memory (2006: 58). Providing a fundamental resource for understanding collective identity through the city's history, Cologne's City Archive was no exception. On the one hand – and paradoxically – the archive collapse seems to have made people in Cologne more aware of the city's cultural memory and heritage. On the other, it has exposed a kind of amnesia, or failure to remember, amongst Cologne's citizens. The incident has been discussed in the media in terms of the 'loss' of the archive and its material, which, although retrieved, will remain 'unremembered' ['unerinnert'] as long as it is unavailable (Überall 2013).<sup>5</sup> However, this implies that the material was previously in widespread, general use, when in fact the archive has gained most public attention with its disappearance. Indeed, the disaster shows how little people were aware of the archive and its valuable collection before it was lost (König 2010: 11). This hidden significance is, in some senses, fundamental to the archive, which keeps its material on the condition of its withdrawal from circulation (Fohrmann 2002: 21), but it questions the extent to which people can really be said to mourn the loss of material that they never knew existed (Klopotek 2009). A former city conservator has suggested that the 'Loch' should be kept as Cologne's Ground Zero, that is, a reminder of 'was man hatte und was verloren ist' [what one had and what is lost] (quoted in Wilberg 2011). But if the 'Loch' were kept open, should it not in fact serve as a reminder of something else, namely the collective amnesia that became visible too late?

At both local and national levels, the archive scandal itself has become emblematic of the city's apparent readiness to forget. A radio report marking the

anniversary of the archive collapse in 2013 noted that the controversy had all but disappeared from the national media, signalling a kind of permanent memory loss for (and of) the archive (Überall 2013). Tension has arisen in the face of attempts to brush aside the events and the losses incurred, gestures that themselves have been read as characteristic for Cologne. Following the 2014 anniversary commemoration (which that year actually coincided with the ‘Rosenmontag’ procession), the public was outraged to find that refuse collectors had cleared away not only revellers’ beer bottles but also the wreaths, candles and messages laid in memory of the human and archival victims (the slogan, in Cologne dialect, read ‘Nit verjesse – Strüßjer för Minsche un Böcher’ [‘don’t forget – flowers for people and books’]). For the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, this scandal was also symptomatic of attitudes towards the collapse, which have been dominated by ‘Cologne indifference’ (Rossmann 2014). For some, the whole affair smacks of the Cologne motto ‘wat fott is, is fott’/‘what’s gone is gone’ (Überall 2013), a saying often used to express the kind of stoic acceptance witnessed in the post-war years.

Indeed, Cologne has had to raise itself from the rubble before, but according to theatre director Karin Beier, unlike previous disasters, the archive collapse has not affirmed, but rather extinguished Cologne’s spirit, leaving her anxious that the city has started to identify with demolition as a kind of local tradition (König 2010: 9). It certainly seems that the archive has gained visibility in its collapsed state, as ‘Loch’. It is now more readily recognizable, perhaps, as the sort of void that has become a significant architectural feature in the Berlin Republic (Huyssen 2003: 49–71). The void is central to Daniel Libeskind’s Jewish Museum, marking both the fact of erasure and the persistence of traces of the past, even in their negative, absent form (Young 2000: 175–83). Derrida

is cautious about Libeskind's void, however, asking whether it does not exclude the past by constructing or imposing an unknowable, inaccessible absence that negates the very possibility of space that underlies the inscription of history (Derrida 1994: 117). In Cologne, the public perception of the 'Loch' as void also suggests an attachment to this unknowable absence, which is, paradoxically, legible as a feature of the post-war landscape, but which negates the very space formerly occupied by the archive.

Yet the failings of the archive have also provoked responses that refuse to accept that 'what's gone is gone', unsettling any attempts to forget the past through agitation, protest and performance. These responses highlight, moreover, how the archive was always already implicated in the control of memory, laying the past to rest, in the very act of preserving it. Indeed, if the archive buries that which 'could not be destroyed purely and simply', its collapse brings with it the potential for 'stirring up disorder in the present' (Mbembe 2002: 22). According to Mbembe, when archives are destroyed, their power is not abolished, but rather displaced, and the memory of the archive inscribed 'in a double register' of the spectral (the ghosts that have been raised with the disturbance of power) and of fantasy (what others make from the remnants of the past) (2002: 23).

Mbembe may be writing about the wilful, rather than accidental, destruction of records by the state, but his observations on their displaced power are strikingly relevant to the Cologne collapse. Two responses in particular – a video performance by the artist Tanya Ury and a play by Elfriede Jelinek – have used the disaster to challenge how we think about personal and collective memory and the role of the archive in these different modes of remembering. Ury responds very personally using performance to raise the spectre of Jewish identity that, rather than being simply accommodated in the archive, seems to

have been buried there. Jelinek's response, meanwhile, is very public, and displaces the memory housed in the archive to the city playhouse, which becomes the main stage for the frustration and anger felt in the city.

Above all, by asserting the performing body in their work, Ury and Jelinek reassert those less formal modes of memory excluded from the archive. A municipal archive includes, in the first instance, formal, official documents and artefacts; it controls memory 'by the principles of reason', anonymizing and regulating memory 'without custom, or story or rhythm' (Lyotard 1993: 194). But where the archive and its regulating forces have broken down, other, more physical, bodily modes of memory have become perceptible. For performance theorist Rebecca Schneider, the performing body offers a more meaningful mode of preserving and passing on the past by lending expression to what the archive does not. It counters the archival assumption that flesh 'slips away', exposing this as the archive's 'blind spot'. Indeed, for Schneider 'the place of residue is arguably flesh in a network of body-to-body transmission of affect and enactment – evidence, across generations, of impact' (2011: 100). The persistence of the female body in particular challenges the patriarchal, patriarchal logic of the archive, which seeks to contain and order the past according to its own law ('consignation' and 'domiciliation') (Derrida 1996: 2–4). The return of the past, mediated through the 'slippery feminine subcutaneousness' of the body, disrupts 'the assumption that if it is not [...] "houseable" within an archive, it is lost, disappeared' (Schneider 2011: 103, 101). The Cologne archive shows quite literally the collapse of this premise, and the responses by Ury and Jelinek use the space that has been opened out as a result to expose the radical failure of the patriarchal control of memory.

### **Tanya Ury, *Fury and archive burn out***

British Jewish performance artist Tanya Ury lives and works in Cologne. In 1999 she bequeathed the estate of her grandfather Alfred H. Unger to the City Archive, where it would join personal documents belonging to her great uncle Wilhelm Unger. Alfred Unger was a journalist, playwright and, between 1924 and 1933, the head dramaturge at the German film company, UFA. In 1937 he went into exile in England, where he continued to write and report for various organizations including the BBC. Unger eventually returned to Germany, where he was awarded the Order of Merit. Wilhelm Unger lived and worked in Cologne as an author and journalist. He spent World War II in exile in England and Australia, but also returned to Germany, where he was highly influential in cultural circles. Perhaps most significantly, he founded, together with Heinrich Böll, Germania Judaica, Europe's largest specialist library for German Jewish history and culture. The Unger estates were lost in the archive collapse in 2009 and Ury has made a number of works in response. Her ongoing *Archive* series includes to-date *Archive Fever* and *Conscience*, and *Fury and archive burn out*, both of which will be discussed briefly here. Like Ury's other work, her response to the archive collapse lends expression to the inherited trauma of annihilation and persecution suffered by her German Jewish relatives under National Socialism, staging 'the objectified status of her own body as Jewish female artist within the German setting' (Brungs 2011: 190). But specifically, it expresses Ury's anger and frustration at the loss of valuable material in the collapse and at the failure of the archive to provide a safe deposit for these things.

Ury's *Fury* is part of the 'delegated video performance' *Misplaced Women?* by the Serbian artist, Tanja Ostojić. Ostojić thematizes the marginalization and disempowerment that she experiences as a female artist from a non-EU country, and in this work invites 'women volunteers [to] carry packed suitcases in the [*sic*] public spaces repeatedly pausing to pack and unpack as they move about the city' (*Misplaced Women* n.d.). The title might appear as a misrendering of 'displaced women', but whereas 'displaced' implies a more irreversible state of dispossession and decentring, 'misplaced' suggests temporary location elsewhere, and a moment of forgetfulness, of mislaying something. Thus, Ostojić's title asks whether these women have been forgotten, mislaid, in society and what their rightful place might be. *Misplaced Women?* not only focuses on forced migration but also 'desired mobility', not only the 'vulnerability' of the 'mobile female body', but its potential empowerment. For her contribution, Ury uses a suitcase that belongs to her brother and that contains some of her grandfather's manuscripts. For some reason, these did not make it to the archive with the bulk of Unger's estate in 1999, and so persist as a reminder of what has been lost. Carrying the heavy suitcase, Ury departs from her flat on what she calls a kind of pilgrimage to the hole left at the site of the archive. Here, she stops, opens the case and begins to examine its contents, before reading from one of the documents. She then replaces it and continues on her way. In line with Ostojić's project description, Ury has uploaded *Fury*, which is available as a long and short version, to vimeo. She has also shown the piece as a video installation at Cologne galleries (kjubh, EL-DE Haus) and presented it at different events in Bonn, Utrecht and Berlin (Ury 'Archive-*Fury*').



Ury's pilgrimage seems to perform the passage from home to archive, from a personal to a public place of memory – in other words, 'domiciliation' (Derrida 1996: 2). But it actually shows the failure of this transition. *Fury* is marked by a sense of aimlessness and futility where Ury is literally barred from accessing the former archive. She approaches the site from different sides, but is always held at a distance by the plastic barriers and metal grilles that surround it. The collapse of the archive means that she cannot deposit the case and must take it back home with her. It also condemns Ury to a kind of homelessness: the family estate was her last connection to Cologne as a place of family history and her aimless wandering in *Fury* performs the way in which this link has been lost. In another sense, however, the failure of the passage from home to archive also makes the remaining suitcase a burden (as Ury says, 'I've been carrying my family skeletons around – they're not in the cupboard' (2009a: 43:34)), and she needs to divest herself of it if she is to continue her artistic project of working through her own identity through performance. Indeed, on her pilgrimage, Ury makes repeated reference to her ignorance about the Unger estates – she has been too busy with her own art to look at the contents. It becomes clear that depositing the material in the archive was a way of deferring the encounter with her family history, believing it in safe hands until she felt able to undertake that work. Now she is confronted with this legacy again, unexpectedly, and she does not know where it belongs: 'There isn't an Archive [*sic*] here now, to which it might belong. It doesn't belong anywhere, or maybe it's mine, or – I don't know' (2009a: 49, 37–44). Moreover, by making herself the focus of *Fury*, Ury arguably ultimately fails to accommodate the memory of her forefathers any better through her performance. Their memory is present through the contents of the suitcase, but the

narrative is largely about Ury's perceived losses. When she does take out one of the manuscripts to read in front of the camera, she fails to provide a sufficient response to the text, which is a rather moving tale of reconciliation in post-war Cologne. Instead, Ury returns it to the case and continues her pilgrimage.

*Fury*, like all of Ury's work, is provocative: it is accusatory and positions Ury as a victim, even whilst betraying her own unease at having failed to engage with the material of her family legacy before it was too late. For Ury, the collapse is first and foremost a personal tragedy. In one of a series of newspaper articles, she even accused the archive of killing her relatives for a second time (2009b), an accusation that aggravated those around her; following a television appearance, she became embroiled in a heated e-mail exchange with the spokesman for the Mayor's press office, which she reads to camera at the beginning of *Fury*. Ury's blatant linking of the archive collapse to the crimes of National Socialism was bound to cause offence, first because her art is purposefully uncomfortable, but second because it makes the connection that seems inevitable in contemporary German culture: this recent incident is still linked to the Holocaust. In *Fury*, Ury casts herself as an avenging goddess, who haunts the city and the site of the collapse in the name of her grandfather and great uncle. Like the Erinyes, who in the *Oresteia* act as advocates for Clytemnestra, tormenting Orestes for the murder of his mother, Ury seeks to defend her forefathers and becomes a menacing presence in the city. Here, she seeks not the trail of blood that leads Aeschylus's furies to Orestes, but a paper trail. This has been lost, however, and when she arrives at the archive, there is no court assembled; the house of the law has collapsed. Whereas, after the trial of Orestes, the Furies reside in their new home as the kindly ones, venerated by the citizens, Ury returns

to the home from which she departed, still maligned and outcast for her accusatory response.

*Fury* is a provocative and problematic piece, certainly, but it does also challenge our understanding of the archive by confronting us with the ‘absent flesh’ that haunts it. ‘[F]undamentally a matter of discrimination and of selection’ (Mbembe 2002: 20), the archive determines how the city remembers its citizens. The accommodation of Ungers’ estates in the archive symbolized their status as integrated, valued Cologne citizens, who contributed significantly to the city’s cultural life, but arguably it also laid to rest the more troubled parts of the family history. Ury carries with her the memories of persecution as inherited trauma and in *Fury* uses her physical presence to disrupt this official narrative. Her performance attempts to resist the repressive, patriarchal logic of the archive, which always presumes the disappearance of that which cannot be housed as material, documentary remains. It seems that this is a necessary intervention since the archive tells a very different story of the Unger estate. The Unger acquisition is the subject of an entry in the exhibition catalogue celebrating the archive’s 150th anniversary. But ‘Schatzsuche im Keller’/‘Treasure Hunt in the Cellar’ not only makes no mention of Ury as benefactor, it even describes the acquisition as a kind of heroic deed, whereby the archivist identifies and ‘rescues’ a veritable treasure trove, abandoned in a damp London cellar (Anon. 2007: 93–94). This account omits what Ury explains in her video, namely that Eberhard Illner went to London at Ury’s request and with her cooperation. Indeed, whilst Ury speaks favourably of Illner, whose care for and interest in her grandfather’s estate is evident, she describes a much longer process, first of her decision to make the bequest, then of her visit to the archive where she meets Illner, who

shows her where Unger's estate will be looked after. Only then did she agree to Illner coming to London to collect the material. Thus *Fury* acts as a kind of corrective to this 'official' account. In addition to reasserting Ury's part in the story, it also exposes the bitter irony of assumptions about the archive's superiority in accommodating the Unger estates.

The catalogue entry also explains that Unger, an 'exile author', was forced to flee Germany under National Socialism (it does not identify him as Jewish); this 'rescue effort' enables the 'return' of original work from his time in exile, work that includes the concept for an anti-propaganda, satirical radio broadcast (presumably in dialect) for the Rhineland region (Anon. 2007: 94). Foregrounding his local patriotism, the entry fails to acknowledge that precisely these documents are a result of (and on some level a response to) persecution, simply reclaiming him as a figure of political resistance. In this sense, Ury's silence in the face of her grandfather's reconciliation text might be read as her own resistance to his seamless integration into the archive, and thus the city's history, as one of its own. To do this without sufficient acknowledgement of how he came to write in London in the first place seems 'misplaced', and Ury, as 'misplaced woman', embodies this uneasy relationship that her family has with the city. Since the archive collapse and the 'misplacing' of the Unger estates, Ury has to look elsewhere for the traces of Cologne's Jewish legacy. On her way back from her pilgrimage, Ury 'stumbles' across a cluster of 'Stolpersteine', small brass plaques in the pavement that commemorate the lives of (often Jewish) deportees. She stops as she always does, she says, to read the names; she even recognizes some of them as family acquaintances (Ury 2009a: 01:31:21). For Ury, these displaced, dispersed traces are all that is available to her

following the collapse. Their legibility (to her) contrasts, moreover, with the incomprehension of a local man sitting outside a café: reading the stones as more generic signs of National Socialist crimes, he expresses sad incredulity, but also emphasizes that, born in 1941, this has nothing to do with him.

Ury's most recent response to the collapse continues to use performance to assert her presence as a persistent reminder and remainder of the archive. *archive burn out* (2014) 'makes a case for the reinstatement of the hidden or excluded': 'An archive likewise may be more than the sum of its collected parts when in between the lines (the walls of shelves), the subordinate's voice is somehow incorporated into the museum's body, as oral history, for instance'. Ury's *archive burn out* has four parts, *the gatherers*, *the library*, *anti gone* and *burn*, which comprise text spoken by the artist and improvised music. Ury performed the piece to accompany her recent exhibition at the Cologne NS-Documentation Centre, 'Who's Boss: Hair Shirt Army', which incorporates an 'archive' of the artist's hair in a critical refashioning of the military jackets made by Hugo Boss in the Third Reich (NS-Dokumentationszentrum Köln). Extracts from rehearsals are available on the artist's website. Speaking 'the subordinate's voice', Ury embodies this persistent presence, articulating those aspects of the past caught in the gaps of official history. She is 'anti-gone', a revenant figure who resists the loss of her family's archive and, of course, a classical, mythical figure, to which Ury once again has recourse in the face of lost history. The avenging goddess of *Fury* has become Antigone, the woman who dares to disobey the law in order to give her brother a proper burial. As anti-gone/Antigone, Ury performs what in Judith Butler's terms might be seen as a feminist political act, attempting 'to confront and defy the state' (2000: 1): 'In her shell she

accumulates the tiny failures they let slip through the cracks, piecing them together, a collective sin' (Ury *archive burn out*). Here, Ury refers not only to the multiple failings of the city and local government in the archive scandal, but to the crimes of National Socialism. What falls through the cracks, in her view, are those aspects of Cologne's history and identity – represented by her grandfather and great uncle – that are indelibly marked by the trauma of the Holocaust. Catching the 'tiny failures' dispersed in the louder furor, Ury vehemently resists a sanitized version of that history. In *archive burn out*, Ury quotes from various sources, including Derrida's *Archive Fever*. Her title certainly plays on this seminal 'archive' text, but it also refers to the 'emotional exhaustion' caused by the loss of her family's material legacy and to the earlier destruction suffered by her family under National Socialism, to 'obliteration by fire', in other words (Ury *archive burn out*). Ury makes this link by including in her performance a video of her grandfather who was witness to, and victim of, the Nazi book burnings. In this interview from the 1980s, Unger recalls not only the sight of the pyres but also Heinrich Heine's tragically accurate prophesy: this was only the start, burning books can only lead to burning people (1994: 16).<sup>6</sup> For Ury, the two events – the burning of works by 'degenerate' authors and the collapse of the archive – are linked through destruction ('Verbindung durch Vernichtung') (Alleweltonair).

### **Elfriede Jelinek, *Ein Sturz/A Fall***

In 2010, Austrian author Elfriede Jelinek added to the critical voices surrounding the archive scandal with a specially commissioned play, which premiered at Schauspiel Köln under the direction of Karin Beier. *Ein Sturz/A Fall* was performed alongside Jelinek's

play from 2003, *Das Werk/The Works*, and *Im Bus/In the Bus*, a short piece dedicated to the late Christoph Schlingensief, and figured a kind of a satyr play in this trilogy.<sup>7</sup> Each piece is centred around a building site, which is exposed as the site of disaster, amnesia and political and moral collapse. With her rallying cry, ‘Die Baustelle ist ein Kampfplatz’/‘The building site is a battle ground’, Jelinek calls for the transformation of this site of construction into one of conflict. *The Works* deals with the Kaprun Dam, the abuse of prisoners of war in its construction and its later instrumentalization as an icon of Austria’s post-war industrial success. *In the Bus*, meanwhile, highlights a similar case of negligence to that in Cologne: in 1994 construction works to extend Munich’s underground line also collapsed, causing a bus accident in which three people died. All three plays deal with the drive for power and the power of nature – in other words, with hubris, and Jelinek makes a scathing critique of those who refuse to take responsibility for their short-sightedness and shortcomings. Together, Jelinek’s plays produce a relentless critique of our obsession with technology and progress, and the corruption of local politics. But *A Fall* is also a piece in its own right, offering a mercilessly satirical response to recent local events, which, at the time of its performance, really seemed to capture the mood, with impressed audiences even voting it Play of the Year at the Schauspielhaus. Its popularity was probably due in no small part to the way in which Jelinek used the archive collapse both metaphorically and metonymically to launch a scathing attack on the city as a whole. Like the settings of her work more broadly, the archive features for Jelinek here as ‘the site of obsessive inquiry into [the city’s] past’, ‘as representative of cultural sites of coexisting crisis and amnesia’ and ‘as a site of

*jouissance* and perverse pleasure won from this symptomatic site of corruption and decadence' (Piccolruaz Konzett 2007: 10).

With her title, *Ein Sturz*, Jelinek made reference to the collapse [*Einsturz*], whilst punning on the idea of fall [*ein Sturz*] as fall from grace, the fall that comes with hubris, and a single fall or collapse that is subject to repetition as the same mistakes are made and the buck is passed from body to body. Perhaps Jelinek's title also plays with another (Austrian) meaning of the word *Sturz*, that of a glass cover, or bell jar, of the sort used to display ornaments. In this sense, the archive appears ironically as a protective layer that also promises transparency, even exhibition. But what Jelinek in fact reveals is an obscene display of bureaucratic incompetence and insatiable desire for power. The title also signals the incessant textual cascade, itself a kind of collapse, of which Jelinek's piece is made up. Indeed this is not a play in any conventional sense, rather a *Textfläche*, a textual surface onto which are projected different voices, either embodied by figures on the stage or mediated as recordings from radio and television. *A Fall* comprises 39 *Anrufe*, calls made by the chorus – the text comprises for a large part questions and exclamations – who seeks to understand the tumult in the city: 'Welches Geschrei voll Mißklang hebt sich in der Stadt?'/ 'What cry full of discordance is heard in the city?' (Jelinek 2010: 2). Jelinek's chorus speaks with the voice of the people, but dispersed amongst them, now inconspicuous, are local politicians, representatives of the KVB (the Cologne transport company), and owners of the construction companies contracted with the underground extension. Like Ury, Jelinek also critiques patriarchy and the patriarchal structure underlying the archive. The Stadtväter/city fathers (Thiele 2010: 179) insist on their authority, even as their accounts are exposed as woefully inadequate: here, hubris is



a parodical ‘masculine excess’ (Butler 2000: 10). The chorus tries to establish who is responsible for the collapse, but those who might actually be held accountable are part of the accusing throng. Deflecting attention away from themselves, the city patriarchs turn on the elements earth and water, accusing them of causing the archive to collapse because of their unstoppable physical urge to touch each other:

Bitte, wir wollten das nicht, wir sagten es schon, wir sagten es ständig, aber die beiden wollten das unbedingt. Die einen nämlich, über zwei Leichen, zwei Knabenleichen hingestürzt, das Haus hingestürzt, Erde, du bist gewarnt worden nicht nachzugeben, nicht dem Wasser nachzugeben, und was hast du gemacht?/Please, we didn’t want this to happen, we already said so, we said so the whole time, but those two wanted it to happen at any price. One of them collapsed over two corpses, two boys’ corpses, the house collapsed, Earth, you were told not to give in, not to give in to Water, and what did you do? (Jelinek 2010: 8)

Jelinek’s mocking of the authorities as they attribute the collapse to higher powers not only exposes their cowardice, it also parodies the risible statement made by then mayor Fritz Schramma that, in seeking an explanation for the collapse, a natural disaster could not be discounted (quoted in Thiele).

In her play, Jelinek uses the archive collapse to ask who owns the city [‘Wem gehört die Stadt?’ (quoted in Preusser 2010a: 26)]. When a valuable municipal resource and asset is lost, who is affected, who takes responsibility and who will pay to repair this

damage? The City Archive belongs to Cologne, but when its people ask to have back what they have lost, they find they have no say in those matters decided only by the prevailing powers: ‘Denn was nichts kostet, ist nichts wert und hat keine Stimme. Es hat keine Stimme in den Ausschüssen der Stadt, es ist selber Ausschuß, weil es gratis ist’/‘So what doesn’t cost anything isn’t worth anything and doesn’t have a voice. It doesn’t have a voice in the city committees, it’s a reject, because it’s free’ (Jelinek 2010: 9). Since the archive vanished in the mud, its worth has diminished. It is even a burden for the city. How much easier it is to blame another party, here, Earth and Water:

Das mußt du doch verstehen Erde, dich gibts gratis, das Wasser auch, ihr kostet nichts, also kann man euch vergessen. Oder man kann euch endlos Kosten aufbürden, eure Rücken tragen ja alles, und noch dazu gemeinsam! Da tragen sie noch mehr, denn die ganze Scheiße muß ja auch wieder weggeräumt werden, das gefallene Haus, sein Inhalt, der ganze Dreck, den muß man doch voneinander trennen, das Haus vom Dreck muß man trennen, denn der Dreck könnte Wertvolles bergen./Don’t you understand Earth, you’re free, Water too, you don’t cost anything, so we can forget you. Or we can load infinite costs onto you, your backs can carry everything, and what’s more, together. Then they can carry even more, because all this shit has to be cleared away again, the collapsed house, its contents, the whole lot has to be sorted out, we have to sort the house from the rubbish, because there could be something valuable hidden in the rubbish. (Jelinek 2010: 8)

With the collapse, the order of the archive has also broken down, but since no one will take responsibility for the incident, no one is in a position to take custody of the material that remains. Jelinek imagines the chorus made up of the ‘etwas desolate, übriggebliebene Gestalten’/‘rather desolate leftover figures’ from the ‘Rosenmontag’ procession that took place a week earlier (Jelinek 2010: 2). These leftovers also signal how the conventional order of things (of the archive) has been overturned in a carnivalesque gesture. These figures are surrounded by files and papers, by remnants of the archive. But over the course of the play, these become wetter and more damaged, until they become worthless. The archive can no longer fulfil its function or uphold its own order; reflecting this decline, the activities on stage shift from carrying files round to destroying them (Preusser 2010a: 26). Like *Fury* and *archive burn out*, Jelinek’s play also confronts us with the ‘absent flesh’, which, according to Schneider, haunts the archive. It exposes our drive to control the effects of history and memory as fallacy: the past – good or bad – persists and cannot be made to disappear in the excesses of a consumerist present. Even where the material remnants of the past have plummeted into the depths, where the archive has collapsed because the desire for profit and progress was so great, the past – messy, inconvenient – returns and overwhelms us. Here, elemental, slimy bodies – earth and water – figure the past as uncontainable nature, resistant to and physically resisting the attempt to domesticate it as history written according to archival, patriarchal law.<sup>8</sup>

Like Ury, Jelinek also uses a classical point of reference, working in an explicitly parodic mode with the first of the *Oresteia*, *Agamemnon*. Thus her title takes on further connotations: *Ein Sturz/A Fall* uses the fall of Troy and the ensuing moral and social

decline satirically to show how in modern-day Cologne the collapse of the municipal archive signals the downfall of the city more broadly. Of course, the Cologne drama is no tragedy and the demise is brought about not by the gods, but through chaos, negligence and disavowal: this is, says Jelinek, '[e]ine Parodie auf die griechische Polis'/'a parody on the Greek *polis*' (quoted in Preusser 2010a: 26). In *Agamemnon*, the chorus fails to act, even as it sees the tragedy unfold (Collard 2002: xi–xii); in *A Fall*, the chorus actually comprises (and conceals) those responsible for the disaster, even as it accuses earth and water of causing the archive to collapse. As in *Agamemnon* '[p]rocess, cause and consequence are seen in a single timeless moment' (Conacher 1989: 41), so Jelinek uses the archive collapse as a motif to consider its cause and consequences, whilst also exposing the city's failings in investigating the incident. As Clytemnestra observes how the fall of the city brings divergent reactions – the lament of the besieged and the triumph of the victors, Jelinek notes how opposing voices rise from the chaos of the archive collapse – the discontented citizens and the construction workers who will profit nevertheless (or all the more): 'Erde und Wasser, Sieger vom Besiegten kaum getrennt. Geschrei voll Mißklang in der Stadt. Erde und Wasser, Essig und Öl, gießt du sie beid in ein Gefäß, getrennt bestehend einander abhold, was passiert dann?'/ 'Earth and Water, the conqueror hardly separated from the conquered. Cries full of discordance in the city. Earth and Water, vinegar and oil, if you pour them both into a vessel, existing separately, averse to each other, what happens then?' (Jelinek 2010: 8; c.f. Aeschylus 2002: 11, l. 320–26).

Central to Jelinek's critique is the symbol of the house. All of the past misdeeds that catch up with *Agamemnon* during the course of the action are crimes 'against the

house or home', and this is reflected in the way the focus of the *Oresteia* moves 'from the individual to the House, and from the House to the *polis*' (Conacher 1989: 3). Similarly, in *A Fall*, the archive features as a 'house' (Derrida's 'house, [...] domicile, [...] address'), which symbolizes at once the politics, history and memory of the city (Jelinek 2010: 2). When the house-prophets foresee the fate of the house of Atreus, they cry: 'The house! Oh, the house, alas'/'Oh wehe / Oh Haus, oh Haus' (Aeschylus 2002: 13, l. 410; 1997: 33, l. 414–15) and Jelinek's chorus foretells the fate of the city following the fall of the archive: 'Des Hauses Seher sagen das auch: Das wird böse enden. O weh, o weh. Haus, du Haus!'/ 'The prophets of the house also say: that will end badly. Alas, alas. House, oh house!' (Jelinek 2010: 5). In the *Oresteia*, tragedy comes with the curse of the House of Atreus. It is haunted by an evil spirit, by past misdeeds, but also condemned to witness further crimes; in Cassandra's vision, it is a human slaughterhouse.<sup>9</sup> The family line is contaminated by the past and no good can come forth anymore. In this sense, Aeschylus offers an ideal template for Jelinek's 'Stadt Psychoanalyse'/'city psychoanalysis' of Cologne (quoted in Preusser 2010a: 26). Performed together with *The Works*, a play closer to Jelinek's *oeuvre* in its critique of the 'Haus Österreich'/'House of Austria' and its cabinet of horrors (Weigel 1987: 195),<sup>10</sup> *A Fall* subjects Cologne to a similar kind of scrutiny, where the collapse of the archive and the negligence surrounding this catastrophe becomes symptomatic for longer term, more wide-reaching failures that impact on cultural identity and memory. By collapsing the different houses, ancient and modern, civic and private, Jelinek draws attention to the disregard at the level of local politics for Cologne's cultural heritage and memory and shows the archive collapse as an allegory of this.

Jelinek plays not only with different meanings of the word ‘house’ but also with the different locations and functions of Cologne houses caught up in the archive scandal. In addition to the archive as house of municipal history, she evokes the house (as home) of the two human victims, and stages both in another house, namely the city’s playhouse. For this place, too, had until recently been threatened with collapse when plans were announced for its demolition and the construction of a new theatre on a new location. In *A Fall*, Jelinek cleverly collapses not only the different houses – the archive, the apartment block, the theatre – but also the different scandals: ‘Wegen eines einzigen Hauses das ganze Theater!’/‘All this drama (lit. this whole theatre) because of a single house’ (Jelinek 2010: 11). The proposal to demolish the theatre generated much protest, however, with Beier at the vanguard, and this swayed the vote in favour of refurbishment. Jelinek’s parody of one collapse on the site of another near-collapse met with great audience approval: the combined victory – saving the theatre and enthusiasm for *A Fall* – seems to signal the determination of Cologne people to keep their municipal buildings standing (Preusser 2010b: 141).

Yet the various collapses of various houses rather bury the City Archive in Jelinek’s play. In fact, it hardly really features in *A Fall*. Instead, its presence (as absence) is felt, according to Beier, as a kind of ‘Phantomschmerz’ (lit. phantom pain, or phantom limb) (2010). In this sense, Jelinek refuses to allow Cologne people to mourn the archive as something they once owned, but have now lost (a perhaps disingenuous gesture in any case). ‘Phantomschmerz’ is, in a psychoanalytic reading, a means of resisting narcissistic injury through pseudo-possession; that this form of ownership is only perceptible as pain is the compromise made in the face of complete loss (Mitscherlich 1983: 309–18). By

making the archive present in her play only as a phantasmatic sensation, Jelinek forces her audience to question their claim to loss when their sense of ownership can only really be called pseudo-possession. In other words, she asks her audience whether they really mourn the archive that they never knew they had. Above all, Jelinek refuses to give the audience a space for “angemessene[s]” Gedenken, die “angemessene” Analyse des Geschehens’/‘appropriate’ commemoration, ‘appropriate’ analysis of the event’ (Beier 2010). Indeed, in *A Fall*, the commemoration of the victims – human and material – is highly ambivalent (Thiériot and Schenkermayr 2013: 188). Here, the archive, ‘[u]nsere[r] überstolze[] Ruhm, de[r] Ruhm unserer Stadt’/‘our overly-proud renown, the renown of the city’, had to be sacrificed, together with Kahlil G. and Kevin K. to an angry capitalist god: ‘Dann haben wir mit einem Stück Gebäude bezahlt und mit zwei Stück Personen’/‘Then we paid with a piece of building and with two pieces of people’ (Jelinek 2010: 10, 7). But this ambivalence is a pivotal aspect of Jelinek’s play, which does not merely make a mockery of the incompetence of municipal authorities, but also refuses her (originally) Cologne audience a share in any kind of victim status. Indeed, the fools of the city government are concealed amongst the chorus, but this is also where the city’s people are found: ‘Die Täter sind unter uns, nein, wir sind die Täter’/‘The perpetrators are among us, no, we are the perpetrators’ (Thiele 2010: 179). As a consequence, the audience cannot simply condemn the authorities; rather, they too must ask whether anything has been learnt from the catastrophe (Beier 2010).

## Conclusion

The work produced by Jelinek (an Austrian author) and Ury (a British artist) in response to the Cologne archive collapse shows how this very local incident is in fact a disaster of national – even European – proportions ('ein Unglück von nationalem Ausmaß' (Schmidt-Czaia and Soénus 2010: 7)). Whilst this relates in the first instance to the material losses sustained in the collapse – this was one of the most significant archives north of the Alps, the responses discussed here (the citizens' initiatives, Ury's performances, and Jelinek's play) reveal more wide-reaching problems with the politics and culture of memory in Germany. At a local level, the collapse has become emblematic for Cologne's readiness to forget – 'wat fott is, is fott'/'what's gone is gone' – but more broadly exposes unease about remembering those aspects of the past that resist the prescriptions of an official account. Following the incident, the archive has gained unintended visibility and an unprecedented position in Cologne's public consciousness. The site has been opened up literally and metaphorically, and for Ury and Jelinek, provides an opportunity to expose the patriarchal, patriarchal authority that governs memory, as deeply flawed. Indeed, as Mbembe notes, the destruction of the archive does not abolish its power, but rather displaces it: in their work, it finds expression in a 'double register' of fantasy and the spectral (2002: 23). Faced with the erasure of history, Ury and Jelinek have recourse to classical, mythical figures – to Agamemnon, to the Erinyes, to Antigone. This is, however, a precarious political approach since their responses risk 'slipping into irreality' (Butler 2000: 2). But ultimately, this danger is averted by the haunting presence of performing bodies; embodiments of the ghosts of the past that had no place in the archive and that remain after its collapse.



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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> For accounts of the collapse, see Otten (2010) and Fischer (2010).

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<sup>2</sup> All translations mine unless otherwise stated.

<sup>3</sup> In response to the focus on Berlin since Unification, Lutz Koepnick challenges critics to ‘Forget Berlin’ (2001) and writing about ‘Hamburg memories’, Angelika Bammer reminds us that ‘Berlin is [...] not Germany’ (2001: 356).

<sup>4</sup> Matz came ninth in the competition for the Berlin Holocaust memorial with a design that seems, in an uncanny manner, to anticipate the situation in Cologne: his ‘Beton-Loch’ [concrete hole] was called *Leerstelle/Void* and was supposed to confront visitors with an abyss or absence (see Herz and Matz 2001).

<sup>5</sup> The disaster even features in a children’s book about Cologne’s post-war history, told from the perspective of the superhero ‘Kölnman’. He describes it as the worst emergency he has ever encountered and is inconsolable because, away from the city at the time, he was unable to avert the catastrophe (Viegner 2013: 102–09).

<sup>6</sup> *Verbannte und verbrannte Kunst* (1983) by Marianne Tralau is available here, <http://www.nrhz.de/flyer/beitrag.php?id=1416>. Unger deviates slightly from Heine’s original and attributes the quote to a false source.

<sup>7</sup> *Ein Sturz/A Fall* and *Im Bus/In the Bus* premiered at Schauspiel Köln that year and *Das Werk/The Works* already in 2003 at the Burgtheater. Beier’s production of the three plays was invited to the Theatertreffen in Berlin in 2011. I am not aware of any translations of these plays to date, but the Goethe Institut has translated the title of *Das Werk* as *The Works* (see <http://www.goethe.de/kue/the/nds/nds/aut/jel/stu/en5065700.htm>).

<sup>8</sup> For an image of the kinds of slimey figures on stage in Beier’s production see [http://archiv2.berlinerfestspiele.de/de/archiv/festivals2011/03theatertreffen11/tt11\\_progra](http://archiv2.berlinerfestspiele.de/de/archiv/festivals2011/03theatertreffen11/tt11_progra)

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3 July 2014.

<sup>9</sup> ‘ein Menschenschlachthaus’/‘a place for slaughtering men’ (Aeschylus 2002: 30, l. 1092; 1997: 64, l. 1089).

<sup>10</sup> As the oldest of the three plays, *Das Werk/The Works* has been given most critical attention: in the context of Jelinek’s Austro-scepticism (and as part of Jelinek’s so-called ‘Alps Trilogy’), see for example Klein, and following Nicolas Stemann’s Burgtheater production in 2003, see Dürbeck (2007).